

AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL EXCHANGE COUNCIL

INDIVIDUAL STUDY TOUR TO THE UNITED KINGDOM (UK)

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DELEGATE

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Executive Summary

My study tour to the UK came at an opportune time to observe the operations and political dynamics of the UK Labour Party and the broader labour movement, and compare and contrast them with my experience of the same in Australia.

I arrived towards the end of the electoral process for the selection of the UK Labour Party's new leader and deputy leader. It was a contest that attracted considerable controversy and attention, including in Australia.

During my visit I was able to attend the UK Labour Annual Conference and the Trades Union Congress (TUC). I was also able to meet with key personnel, particularly in some of the UK's largest trade unions, as well as many party and union activists around the country. I attended a range of public meetings, rallies and forums ranging from the formation of new student activist groups to meetings in which internationally prominent people presented their thoughts on the state of UK politics.

I was able to hear firsthand thoughts on the leadership election from a variety of people with differing roles and engagement within the labour movement. These views ranged from despair at the future electoral prospects of the Party and anger at the result of the election, to a much more pronounced and buoyant view of hope and optimism expressed by so many activists on the left of the Party.

In my view the turbulent politics within the UK Labour movement which defined the period of my study tour were the culmination of many decades of events preceding and, as I will outline, it is my belief that the critical shaping of these events can be put down to the nature of the rules of the UK Labour Party. UK Labour's manner of internal organising and dispute resolution is undoubtedly very different from the Australian Labor Party (ALP). There are many features of the UK Labour Party that the ALP may wish to emulate. However, the very disconnected way in which the different arms of the UK labour movement work with one another and the disenfranchisement that brings, real or perceived, is not a feature that I believe we in Australia should replicate.

Another key finding from my tour was the very different structure and style of the trade union movement in the UK and its engagement with the Labour Party. It is my contention that the trade union movement within Australia has a much more integrated working relationship with the ALP than its UK counterparts do with their Labour Party.

Coupled with a far more limited role for the membership in policy development and candidate selection, the seeds of disenfranchisement were well and truly sown within the UK Labour movement decades before this year's leadership contest.

It is clear that for a major political party to be effective, its diverse constituent components must work harmoniously. My experience in the UK has demonstrated to me that this can only happen when the rules of the party allow each constituent component to realise their goals within the party.

Key findings from main observations

The constituent components, rules and structure of UK Labour

The gaps that have arisen between the UK Parliamentary Labour Party (UKPLP) and the other components of the broader labour movement were on display in full for the leadership election of 2015. I believe these divisions have been growing for decades and are a direct consequence of events and rule changes in years past. The disconnect that exists between the UKPLP and the other party constituencies appears to be far greater than anything that exists within the ALP.

In the ALP, preselection for each election cycle is the norm. Challenges against incumbents are not at all common and sometimes the process is subverted through decisions of Administrative Committees or the National Executive. However, the de facto arrangement is that all Members of Parliament (both Members of the House of Representatives and Senators) are required to be re-preselected in order to contest the subsequent election with the endorsement of the ALP.

In the UK, Labour Members of Parliament are not required to face re-selection. They are automatically given the endorsement of their Party to contest the next general election. This has inevitably generated division between MP's and their Constituency Labour Party members.

The vast majority of seats in the UK House of Commons are what we would consider safe seats. That is to say that most party strategists and pundits consider the margin in these seats between the winning party and the next closest contender insurmountable. This generally means that, barring any extreme circumstances, once a Labour candidate has won initial endorsement and the subsequent general election for a safe seat constituency they are widely considered to be secure in their parliamentary seat until such time as they chose to retire. This allows MP's time to focus on the next height of their career, almost exclusively over servicing their constituency.

The fact that a Member of Parliament does not require the support of their Constituency Labour Party (CLP) members to be re-selected inevitably leads to a disconnect between the two as the MP seeks to court influence where it counts and CLP members feel neglected.

The sphere of influence that the MP gravitates towards is the political class establishment of Westminster. This includes the powerful finance brokers of the City of London (the City), major media pundits, lobbyists for major corporations and powerful sectors of the economy and other longer serving MP's.

This division in political loyalties manifests itself most particularly on acute matters of policy difference where the establishment political class and grassroots labour movement activists hold considerably divergent views.

Unlike in Australia, Labour MP's in the UK are not required to vote in the parliament according to caucus solidarity. Whilst there are some appealing aspects to this, I believe it is another key part in the breakdown of proper working relationships between the UKPLP and the rest of the Party. Not requiring MP's to follow party policy further erodes the value of participation by grassroots members and affiliates in the policy development processes of the Labour Party.

The role of the Annual Labour Conference in determining party policy has also been significantly pruned back over several years. The problem with this is that it destroys the purpose of the forum as a dispute resolution body to resolve differences of opinion on policy matters. This inevitably has led to a feeling of disenfranchisement from activist members of the party and affiliates and was a key contributing factor in the groundswell of support for Jeremy Corbyn in the leadership election.

Leadership election constituent components

Under the new One Vote One Value leadership election model adopted by UK Labour, the UKPLP and affiliated trade unions lost their weighted votes in the process. Three distinct groups were able to vote in the contest however each individual vote was worth the same. The three groups comprised ordinary party members, registered party supporters and members of affiliated trade unions. Jeremy Corbyn won convincingly with all three groups.

Votes in the leadership election from each constituent component:

- 245,520 – members (58%)
- 105,598 – registered supporters (24.9%)
- 71,546 – affiliate members (16.9%)
- 422,664 – total votes cast

Other observations

Europe

The position of the UK Labour Party on the forthcoming referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union (EU) was hotly debated at the time of my tour. A majority of those within the trade union movement and an even larger majority of those in the Labour Party were of the opinion that Britain was far better placed by being a member of the EU than by leaving it. They argued that the human rights and labour protections provided through membership of the EU were pivotal for advancing equality and workplace rights within the UK, as their own laws are nowhere near as comprehensive.

The alternative viewpoint supported an exit from the EU largely on the basis of recent events in which the EU was perceived to have taken far too harsh a stance on indebted nations resulting in mass poverty and despair. This position suggested the EU no longer reflects the values it was established to uphold.

Northern Ireland

I was able to briefly visit Belfast during my study tour, where I met with Pádraig Mac Goill, an organiser with Unite the Union.

At the time of my visit, the Stormont was experiencing a constitutional crisis due to the withdrawal of all but one Minister of the largest party, the Democratic Unionist Party, from the mandated (due to the terms of the Good Friday Agreement) power-sharing government with Sinn Fein.

The politics of Northern Ireland (NI) are very distant from that of the remainder of the UK. The main political parties that feature in the other countries do not participate in NI politics and the discourse in NI feels very remote from the rest of the nation or even from the politics of Ireland.

The constituted governing arrangements of NI in practice mean that the same parties will make up the government regardless of the result of the election. It also requires that legislation cannot pass the Stormont without the support of a majority of MP's from the two main factions, the republicans and the unionists.

The ongoing level of division between these two groups and the resultant highly politicised nature of every aspect of society is amazing to observe for someone from a nation with arguably high levels of political apathy.

Further observations from meetings and events

Trades Union Congress (TUC)

Whilst at the TUC in Brighton, I had the opportunity to listen to the former Finance Minister of Greece, Yanis Varoufakis and new Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell talk about their views on the alternative to austerity at a packed fringe event put on by the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS). The PCS represents workers employed by the national government of the UK. It is known for a greater level of industrial activism than many of the larger trade unions in the UK. The issue of European austerity economics dominated much of the debate at the TUC and was a critical part of the debate in the Labour leadership elections.

At the Congress I met with Phyll Opoku-Gyimah, the Head of Campaigns at PCS and discussed the position of the PCS in calling for general strike action as a response to the Tory Government's Trade Union Bill. This position was not shared by the majority of delegates at TUC.

Jeremy Corbyn rallies and events

I was fortunate enough to get a seat at Jeremy Corbyn's final campaign rally in his home constituency of Islington a few days before the end of the leadership election process. The atmosphere was electric: socialism and solidarity were the words of the day. National Public Radio from the United States were curious as to why I was at the event and asked for my perspective on the success of Jeremy Corbyn as an outsider.

On the day of the announcement of the results of the Labour leadership contest, I was able to attend a very large pro-refugees rally in London. After being declared the new Labour leader only hours earlier, Jeremy Corbyn spoke at the culmination of the rally outside the Palace of Westminster. The reception he received from adoring rally goers was truly extraordinary. The musician Billy Bragg also addressed the rally and declared he would be going to his first Labour branch meeting in 25 years due to the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader.

I later attended a small celebratory gathering of long time Jeremy Corbyn activists at a 'socialist revolutionary' themed pub in Islington at which the new leader gave an address.

The Labour leader was the keynote speaker at TUC where he said that 30,000 people had joined Labour in just three days and promised a more participatory and democratic policy development process.

His key policy message at the conference was received with rapturous applause and echoed the main themes of his leadership campaign:

- a liveable social wage for all (minimum £10/h)
- decent homes for everyone with controlled rents
- free education and universal childcare
- unequivocal opposition to austerity, privatisation and outsourcing and support for public services and investment
- a fairer tax and welfare system
- public ownership of the railway and energy sector.

Meetings with trade union officials

I met with Gary Williams and Barney Wakefield, organisers for UNISON (the public services union) to discuss the manner in which the union conducted its workplace organising and the way in which it engaged politically, including as an affiliate of the Labour Party.

On their invitation I addressed UNISON's national youth council in London where I discussed with the delegates key differences in workplace laws between Australia and the UK.

I also participated in a UNISON staff association meeting and tour of Westminster with two Labour MP's who were longstanding members of UNISON. Neither supported Jeremy Corbyn in the leadership election and this juxtaposition with the views of the UNISON staff, most of which did support Corbyn, was jarring and emblematic of the broader divisions through the Party.

When in London I attended the picket line of civil servants and PCS Union members at the National Gallery who were on indefinite strike (90 days at the time) in opposition to the privatisation of their jobs and an attempt to bust the union with the sacking of a lead union rep.

At the Annual Labour Conference I had a sit down meeting with Tony Burke, an Assistant General Secretary for manufacturing with Unite the Union, in which we discussed issues ranging from the future of the Trident defence program and the UK's manufacturing base to the political role of the union within the Labour Party and the EU.

In the last days of my study tour I was able to meet with Martin Smith, the lead National Organiser for the union GMB. Martin was able to provide me with a very solid understanding of the history of the changing rules of the UK Labour Party and the effect these changes have had on the role of the party's affiliates in contributing to policy formulation and candidate selection.

Labour Young Socialists

I attended the inaugural meeting in London of what was called at the time Youth and Students for Corbyn. Just over 100 student activists crammed into a university lecture theatre for the hour long meeting, which eventually determined the group would be named Labour Young Socialists. The goal of the new movement of left wing labour members was to organise and become more active within the forums of the Labour Party to support both Jeremy Corbyn and other left wing candidates and policy positions.

Constituency Labour members

I met with Councillor Paul Smith, Deputy Leader of the Labour Group on Islington Council and President of ALP Abroad. He had been active on the leadership campaigns of both Jeremy Corbyn and the successful candidate for Labour's nominee for London, Lord Mayor Sadiq Khan. We discussed political and electoral organising on a local level in the UK and the nature and role of local government.

Two CLP councillors, ardent Jeremy Corbyn supporters, and dedicated party members I met at the Labour Annual Conference were Lauren Amber Mitchell and John Wilkinson. The sense of elation they had from the result of the leadership election was emblematic of the views of the majority of conference attendees. After listening to the leader's address, John said he had articulated what he had always felt in his heart.

Conclusion

My study tour of the UK could not have been timed better to observe the fractious nature of the relationship between the constituent components of the UK Labour Party.

The election of Jeremy Corbyn to the UK Labour leadership, despite the overwhelming objection of members of the Parliamentary Labour Party to this outcome, I believe can be attributed to a long term erosion of trust between the different wings of the party and a feeling of disenfranchisement from party members, activist supporters and affiliates with the policy development and candidate selection processes of the Party.

This came at the same time as the Party had to consider its approach to a series of contentious policy issues including its position on the upcoming referendum on UK membership of the EU.

I was able to learn a great deal about the manner in which different elements of the Party interact with each other and the changing role they have had in developing Party policy over the years.

I found my visit extremely useful in identifying key differences between the internal operation and practices of UK Labour and its affiliate trade unions and those of the Australian Labor Party and trade union movement.